

In Idaho, it's Trump vs. Cruz - with Rubio closing in

Chris Carlson/The Carlson Chronicles

Soon, courtesy of all Idaho's taxpayers, Republican voters will march to the polls to state their preference for the nation's next commander in chief.

Whether this exercise has any impact upon the presidential sweepstakes remains to be seen, especially since Idahoans will be voting one week after Super Tuesday, the big enchilada that will see more than a third of the delegates being selected.

With Michigan and Mississippi also holding primaries, it's a safe bet the national media will congregate that night in Detroit, not Boise.

Still, it is fascinating to examine which aspirant is being supported by which major Idaho Republican figure. To date one could say Idaho has covered itself with prominent Idahoans having spread their support across most of the candidates.

The one big exception is the current GOP frontrunner, Donald Trump. He has a posted list of 860 supporters, but who they are and how well organized they are remains to be seen. It is doubtful that endorsements by any one figure will carry real influence. Far more likely is the scenario that the one or two top winners in Super Tuesday will likewise do well in Idaho.

In 2008 and in 2012, Idaho Republicans went with the eventual party nominees, John McCain and Mitt Romney.

In 2016, Idaho GOP rules for selecting delegates to the National Convention in July in Cleveland will probably result in more than one candidate picking up Idaho delegates.

If one candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, he will garner all 32 delegates.

If the winner has less than that, to receive delegates the threshold is more than 20 percent. This will guarantee that Idaho has a split delegation at least for the first round of balloting in Cleveland.

In late February, the Idaho race appears to be shaping up as a contest between Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Trump, with Florida Sen. Marco Rubio closing in on the frontrunners.

Rubio has two aces in his hand - U.S. Sen. Jim Risch and the "shadow shogun" of Republican politics, Idaho Falls billionaire businessman Frank VanderSloot. Risch and Rubio serve together on the Foreign Relations and Intelligence committees. Both are devout Roman Catholics.

VanderSloot is a member in good standing of the LDS church. Speculation as to why he would support Rubio over Cruz goes right to the heart of the major difference between Cruz and Rubio regarding the issue of illegal immigrants, who Cruz would ship back, but Rubio would allow to remain if they go to the back of the line of those applying for citizenship.

VanderSloot reportedly employs a goodly number of legal immigrants at his Melaleuca company. He was a major fundraiser last time around for Mitt Romney. Were the Republican National Convention to be brokered, one could expect VanderSloot to switch back to Romney.

Approximately one-third of the Idaho electorate belong to the LDS church. These voters tend to be quite conservative, but some would argue this does not mean they would go for Cruz. After all, several million evangelicals stayed home in 2012 rather than vote for a Mormon.

This fact alone caused some to arch an eyebrow when 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador threw his endorsement to Cruz following the collapse of Rand Paul's campaign. Other Cruz supporters include former Idaho Republican Party Chairman Norm Semanko and state Treasurer Ron Crane.

Jeb Bush enjoyed the support of former Boise Mayor, Gov., U.S. Sen. and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, as well as that of former Attorney General and Lt. Gov. David Leroy.

Phil Reberger, Kempthorne's former chief of staff and majordomo in his own right in GOP circles was also thought to be a Bush supporter.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich has the support Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter as well as two Idaho state legislators, Marv Hagedorn and Robert Anderst.

Idaho's other major officeholders - Sen. Mike Crapo, 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson and Lt. Gov. Brad Little - are all remaining studiously neutral.

To this writer's thinking, the best of the GOP lot, and indeed the best of the whole bunch is Kasich.

As for the Democrats, they caucus on March 22. Last time around, Hillary Clinton's team overlooked Idaho and, to their chagrin, Barack Obama's team captured a majority of Idaho's delegates.

This time, Idaho will be a contest that will come down to whether the young voters' adoration for Sen. Bernie Sanders translates into attendance at their caucus vs. the Clinton team's ability to turn out her base.

One word of caution to Sanders: He'd best back off of his plank calling for free higher education to be treated as a birthright. Universities in states like Idaho or California, where there are private religious-affiliated schools, would rapidly be driven from the field. The College of Idaho, Northwest Nazarene, Brigham Young University-Idaho and Gonzaga simply could not compete against public schools offering free higher education.

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